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SALT-2 is pact with flaws, but . . .

WASHINGTON — When you catch a dangerous criminal, someone who has clearly broken the law, you have the choice of trying to punish him or reeducate him. Both methods have the goal of halting dangerous and criminal behavior.

In dealing with the Soviet Union, President Reagan has been urged by his civilian advisers in the Pentagon to take a third route, the goofy approach: Let the criminal go free—and abolish the law.

The Soviet Union has been cheating on SALT-2. The cheating has been marginal—at the edges of the treaty—rather than outright violation of the central limits on the numbers of missiles the Kremlin may deploy.

The Russians have encrypted radio data from their missile tests, making it harder for us to determine what they are up to. This is a violation of SALT-2. Even so, despite the forbidden encryption, we still have enough information to know that they are testing more than one new type of missile, which would also be a violation of the treaty.

When such violations occur, we can approach the Russians through a Standing Consultative Committee and question them about their behavior. When

caught, they can either stop or explain that it was not really a violation at all—as has sometimes been the case.

But these marginal violations have prompted Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and CIA Director William Casey to try to persuade Reagan to throw out the entire SALT-2 agreement—with its limits on Soviet missiles, its restraints on Soviet warheads, its bans on concealment of test activity, its mechanisms for clarifying confusion.

Better to have no law, they say, than one the Kremlin flouts. This is no doubt ideologically satisfying, but it does not address the central question: Is SALT-2, despite its frayed edges, still in the national security interests of the United States?

SALT-2, signed by Leonid Brezhnev and Jimmy Carter in June 1979, was never ratified by the Senate. Reagan has called it fatally flawed. It has all manner of defects—its missile limits are too high, it does not restrain the quality of the weapons, it raised false hopes that it boded a new era of peace and

good feeling. But SALT-2—the collective, successive work of Henry Kissinger and Cyrus Vance—is a clever document. It was drawn up in such a way as not to interfere with America's strategic

nuclear modernization plans, while at the same time putting a restraint on the Soviet Union. For all its faults, SALT-2 corrects a major shortcoming in the Soviet political system: It gives Soviet civilians a lever they do not otherwise have over the Soviet armed forces.

Under the constraints of SALT-2, for example, the Soviet Union has destroyed 1,000 land-based ballistic missiles as it deployed their replacements. It has not tried to cram more than 10 warheads on its heaviest missile, the SS-18, which could carry as many as 30. It has not concealed its missile silos or its submarine pens from our satellite surveillance.

"They have not dug a new hole, not a missile silo, in 13 years," says Thomas Longstreth of the Arms Control Association, which is defending the treaty. "The Russians have a whole new fifth generation of missiles ready to go. The same administration that has been

telling us that the Soviet threat is growing relentlessly is now arguing that, even without SALT-2, the Soviets are going to stop. That's absurd."

Even more absurd is the attempt to take all limits off the Soviet missile force at precisely the time the U.S. has announced it is embarking on Star Wars, a strategic shield against Soviet missiles. Lifting the SALT-2 limits invites the Russians to build enough missiles to overwhelm whatever defense we may devise.

Reagan faces a decision now because the U.S. is about to deploy a Trident submarine, the Alaska, that would place us over the limit of 1,200 multiple-warhead nuclear missiles. He can honor the treaty by retiring 14 existing missiles—either on a Poseidon submarine or in Minuteman silos. Or he can announce that he is abandoning the treaty. Or he can steer some gray-area middle course.

BUT BOTH THE latter choices, abandonment or compromise, undermine the very law we want the Russians to obey. Both give them the excuse to continue their cheating, and both deny us the right to demand compliance. Neither makes us any safer.